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Department of Political Science

Communitarianism in China?

A Minor Field Study about Chinese students' views on the relation
between individual and society

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Abstract

Communitarianism is often portrayed as a *western* critique of liberalism and universal values. At the same time, China confronts the international community with challenging views on human rights; arguments that remind of communitarian thinking. In order to diminish such ambiguity, the aim of this thesis is to determine the relevance of communitarian and liberal argumentation in the Chinese context. A qualitative method is used in order to map Chinese students' perspectives on the relation between individual and the society.

The analysis shows that both liberal and communitarian ways of thinking can be found among the population. However, the concept of community seems to have limited relevance. It is the idea of the *nation* that encourages the respondents to criticize liberal values. A simplified image of China as communitarian is therefore mistaken and a more nuanced understanding of contemporary China is necessary.

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Keywords: Liberalism, Communitarianism, China , Human rights

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Chinese challenge

How the individual relates to the society is an important aspect of human rights. Liberalism and communitarianism are two perspectives that offer different interpretations of this relation. The concept of universal human rights derives from the idea that there are certain values that apply universally for all people and all times. This is a fundamental premise for the liberal perspective. It is also a premise that has been criticized by so-called communitarians:

“The critique of human-rights universalism on the ground that it is based on Western liberalism has been accompanied by a western critique of liberalism by the so-called communitarian philosophy that finds liberalism, and therefore, by implication, the concept of human rights, too ‘individualistic’ and insufficiently concerned with the common good of human communities.”¹

Communitarianism is best understood as a criticism of certain liberal presumptions, i.e. the supposed universality of human rights. While liberals emphasize the universality and the rationality of certain values, communitarians focus on the society or community as the true source of legitimization for how to organize a society politically.

Due to the origin of the communitarian perspective, the academic literature portrays it as a *western* critique of liberalism. At the same time we are increasingly often confronted with challenging perspectives on human rights that derive from the Asian region. The Chinese political leadership has several times declared that the human rights regime of today builds on western premises and that the concept of human rights must be modified in order to fit the Asian cultural context.²

¹ Freeman p.107

² See Huaqiu, former vice minister of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples’ Republic of China, cited in Angle, p.5; Paltiel; Saich

Indeed, there seems to be some resemblance between communitarianism and Chinese argumentation:

“...the West emphasises the universal and abstract nature of the individual’s civil and political rights, with social rights as secondary, concrete, non-universal and contingent, and that the latter (i.e., China) emphasises social and economical rights, but views all rights as collectively based, concrete, non-universal, and subordinate to state sovereignty.”³

What is troubling with this kind of standpoint is that it offers a too broad and simplistic version of East and West. Even if one can agree that it would be naive to suggest that all Chinese people share the same opinions, we still have limited knowledge on what views actually exist in China.

Scholars have identified a lack of knowledge concerning whether the arguments used in the Chinese debate are similar to those used elsewhere or if the debate is unique.⁴ Previous research has focused on Chinese perspectives on *human rights*: a concept that actualizes several clashes between liberalism and communitarianism. Scholars have explored perceptions of human rights among political leaders, dissidents and Chinese scholars.⁵ Some surveys of Chinese peoples’ perceptions of rights have been conducted, followed by works that aim to determine the role of rights in legal and political struggles.⁶

Chinese students have so far attracted limited interest. Maybe the lack of attention is explained by that it is a heterogeneous group without direct influence on the policy process. However, Chinese students might play a particularly important role when it comes to determine China’s *future* approach to human rights. Not only since they represent the future elite of the society but also because they are a group that historically has had a great impact on Chinese society and politics. The May Fourth Movement in 1919, The Cultural

³ Kent p.30

⁴ Svensson; Angle; Peerenboom

⁵ Svensson; Angle; Weatherley; Peerenboom

⁶ Perry and Selden

Revolution 1966-1976 and the demonstrations at Tianmen Square in 1989 are examples of events where Chinese students have played a decisive role.⁷ Today, almost all of the new recruits to the Communist Party are students. Taking the historical importance and current changes in the society into account, the relevance of exploring the perceptions within this group should be beyond doubt. When trying to determine the relevance of liberalism and communitarianism in Chin, students therefore seem to be a suitable group to analyze.

1.2 Aim and questions for research

The aim of this study is to determine the relevance of liberal and communitarian argumentation among Chinese students. In order to do so, the following questions will be answered:

1. What liberal and communitarian views exist among Chinese students?
2. What views do not correspond to either liberalism or communitarianism?

1.3 Limitations

I use a qualitative method that allows me to determine the relevance of liberalism and communitarianism. Given the qualitative approach, this thesis will not answer the question of how common certain views are. Although the selection of respondents has been made in order to explore as many existing views as possible, this study is limited to exploring existing views among students. Therefore, no attempts will be made to speak of the views among the rest of the Chinese population.

⁷ Spence; Saich p.57-90

2. Theory

2.1 Defining liberalism and communitarianism

The literature on the liberal and communitarian perspectives consists of works of various theorists. The task of defining in what way they differ from each other is complicated since there is a discrepancy not only between the two perspectives but also within each perspective. The discrepancy between communitarian theorists can be exemplified by how some accept the idea of a human rights concept while others, like Walzer, have described human rights as a ghost, in the sense that it is something that does not exist.⁸

Comparing to liberalism, communitarianism is a younger perspective. Initially, communitarianism was a response to the claims made by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls is sometimes given the reputation of having reinvented the liberal political philosophy since he suggested a new way of reasoning about justice.⁹ According to Rawls, people who find themselves in an imaginary pre-life position (original position) are likely to make certain choices concerning the organization of their future society. This assumption can be thought of as the starting point for communitarian criticism. Scholars such as Sandel and Walzer questioned the assumption that people who have never been a part of a society would be able to make choices with moral implications about how to organize it. As a reaction to Rawls' liberalism, MacIntyre, Nussbaum and Taylor and others formulated various kinds of criticisms that all go under the name communitarianism.¹⁰

Although the scope of communitarian criticism has shifted somewhat in recent years (nowadays it mainly concerns group rights and minorities' rights), some basic premises remain the same. In the light of the discussion about exactly

⁸ Walzer is an example of a theorist who has changed positions during the years and who nowadays seem to take a more liberal position

⁹ Nordin p.147

¹⁰ Nordin p.148

what one has to believe in order to qualify as either liberal or communitarian, academics agree that there are at least three clashes that constitute fundamental presumptions of each perspective.¹¹ These include:

a) Conception of the person

The conception of the person refers to how each perspective understands human nature. It is the discussion about whether we have a highest-order interest in making reflective (rational) choices in life or if that is a liberal value that applies uniquely to liberal societies. It is also the discussion about whether there are moral values that are directly connected to being a human. The liberal perspective interprets the human being as a person who has certain values simply because she is human. The impact of society for the creation of values is therefore thought of as secondary.

Communitarianism stands for the idea that it is the community that provides human beings with moral thinking.¹² Daniel Bell has described this as the view that liberalism fails to take into account the importance of community for personal identity, moral and political thinking and judgements about peoples' wellbeing in the contemporary world.¹³ The communitarian perspective therefore questions the liberal conception of the person and states that a human being's values and primary interests are not born with her. Rather, it is the human being's *connections to culture* that create her identity and thereby also her primary interest in life. The impact of society for the creation of values is therefore thought of as primary.¹⁴ According to the communitarian perspective, the idea of a liberal individual is a liberal construction. The claim that reflective choice is necessary for a good life is therefore nothing more than one possible version of good life. A typical argument put forward by communitarian theorists is that it is the society in which people live that

¹¹ Compare with Bell 1993; Mulhall & Swift

¹² The communitarian perspective builds on the idea of a *community*. A community can be a group of people who share a common identity, historical experiences or religion. For a discussion of what a community is, see Bell 1993

¹³ Bell 1993 p.4

¹⁴ Mulhall & Swift p.14

determines their understanding of themselves and of how one should lead one's life.

b) The degree of universalism

This clash refers to the discussion about whether liberal values are suitable to all societies and all times and whether liberal values have something intrinsically plausible about them. According to the liberal perspective the individual human being is understood as a *liberal* human being. And if liberalism builds on the rational essence of human beings, it consequently has universal application. As an example, the potential universality of human rights is beyond doubt:

"The universality of core human rights is quite compatible with cultural diversity, and the argument of cultural diversity should not challenge the core universal human rights but, rather, might influence the mode and manner of their application in particular societies." ¹⁵

One might think that the opposite of endorsing universal values would be commitments to relativism. However, the relativistic perspective differs from the communitarian perspective in various aspects. Most importantly, communitarianism does not lead to the conclusion that all values are equally plausible. On this aspect, the essence of communitarianism is that the process of finding out which values to promote in a specific society should take place *within* the community.

Since the communitarian perspective states that it is the culture that creates values, the variety of cultures implies that no values can have universal and cross-cultural application. The supposed superiority of certain values (i.e. certain human rights) is, according to this way of thinking, mistaken.¹⁶ An estimation of cultural particularity is central in order to understand how a community should organize itself. Since each culture has the right to pursue its

¹⁵ Ramcharan p.56

¹⁶ Parekh p.96

own values, particularism is more preferable than a universal chart of rights. MacIntyre is an example of a communitarian theorist who has questioned human rights with the following words:

“As such, human rights are nothing more than a set of ‘socially established’ rules which come into existence at particular historical periods under particular social circumstances. They are in no way universal features of the human condition.”¹⁷

c) Liberal atomism

The third clash refers to the debate about whether the promotion of liberal values is likely to produce a society that care too little about the common good of the community. It is the discussion about whether the individual’s needs should have priority over the common good of a community, and what effects that is likely to produce. According to the liberal perspective, the individual is the single most important unit. Any society must put the individual first in order to create a good society.

For the communitarian perspective it is the community in which the individuals live that has the priority. Communitarian theorists have even argued that it is justified to limit the rights of the individual in order to protect the common good of a community. During the last decades, communitarian theorists focused on developing recipes for stopping what they call negative tendencies in liberal societies.¹⁸

¹⁷ MacIntyre p.67

¹⁸ *The Responsive Communitarian Platform: Rights and Responsibilities* (Bell 1993)

3. Method

3.1 The use of ideal types

In order to estimate the relevance of theoretic perspectives among a population, an analytic tool is needed. In this thesis, ideal types were considered to be a suitable approach since they would allow me to summarize an extensive debate and to describe the two perspectives in a pedagogical way. The idea behind the ideal types' approach is to describe what characterizes each view and in what way they differ from each other. However, the simplicity of a model also implies that it is doomed to identify central aspects rather than nuanced particularities. When constructing the ideal types I chose to use the three clashes that were presented in chapter 2. I have constructed two ideal types that I call "The Communitarian" and "The Liberal" (see next page).

It may sound problematic that the ideal types had been decided upon *before* gathering the empirical data (the interviews). However, the choice to do so was motivated by the character of the research task: to determine the relevance of these two perspectives.

The use of ideal types can be questioned since they represent descriptions of imagined persons without equivalence in real life. In this thesis this was not considered to be a problem since I am interested in how *ideas* among the Chinese population correlate to theoretic perspectives, and not the *people* that carry them. At this point, it is also important to reflect on the reasonability of creating ideal types on the three clashes from chapter 2. My defence of this approach is that other scholars have identified the same clashes as a minimal standard of what differs liberalism from communitarianism.¹⁹ If I would have formulated more detailed ideal types, I would have had to create them building on ideas of a particular theorist. The relevance of letting such an ideal type communitarian could then have been questioned.

¹⁹ Mulhall & Swift; Bell 1993

The construction of the ideal types is a critical part of a study, not only since they require excellent knowledge of the perspectives in question. Another aspect is that the degree to which they are detailed determine the character of the later analysis of existing views. A loose ideal type leads to a situation where the researcher has to do extensive interpretations, which might weaken the inter-subjectivity. On the other hand, a very specified (detailed) ideal type risks leading to a situation where many formulations and ideas do not fit into any category and are left outside the analysis.²⁰ Having considered both possibilities, I have chosen to use rather elastic ideal types. In order to increase the transparency of the later analysis I will provide motivations for each categorization.

Figure 1: Ideal types

| | THE LIBERAL | THE COMMUNITARIAN |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Conception of the person | Based on rationality | Based on culture |
| Degree of universalism | Universalism | Particularism |
| Liberal atomism | Individualism | Collectivism |

3.2 Interviews as method

Interviews were considered to be a suitable way of answering the questions for research. The main reason for using interviews was that I wanted to explore views within a population (students) that did not offer any written material to analyze. One aspect of the use of interviews is that they offer the interviewee to develop arguments in a more detailed way than a person could have done in a quantitative study, i.e. through compiling a survey. This was considered to be an positive since the character of the phenomena in question is rather abstract and requires some reflection.

²⁰ Bergström & Boréus p.172

Since no quantitative method has been used, generalizing in a statistical way to a bigger population has not been possible. The strength of interviews as a method is first and foremost that they allow the researcher to explore different existing views that exist *within* a population. In this thesis the interviewees served as respondents, not informants. They were not selected because of their knowledge about human rights, but in order to explore as many different ways of thinking as possible.

Before beginning with the interviews, I organized a focus group with students at Fudan University in Shanghai. Four students were invited to discuss human rights and values together. The meeting was valuable since it allowed me to test the questions and gave me feedback on how to develop them further. It also gave me insight into what was “talk of the town” among the students and helped me to get a better understanding of relevant criteria for the selection of respondents.²¹

3.3 Selection of respondents

As already explained, I want to answer the question of which liberal and communitarian views that can be found among Chinese university students. Due to the large number of existing students, a selection of respondents was necessary.²² Given the ambition to explore as many different existing views as possible, the respondents were chosen on a principle of maximal variation.²³ They were selected on pre-established criteria that I perceived of as likely to allow me to discover all different views within the population.²⁴

²¹ The interviewees were first contacted by email and then via telephone. Eight of ten interviews were held in a private conference room at Fudan University. The two remaining interviews were held at another university and in a cafeteria.

²² There are approximately 11 million university students in China (Source: United Nations Development Programme)

²³ For more information about maximal variation, see Esaiasson et al, p.294

²⁴ See appendix 1 for detailed information about the respondents and the criteria for selection

Since China is a country with vast regional differences it would have been preferable to interview students who live in different regions. Due to limited time and resources this was not an option and all of the interviews were conducted in the city of Shanghai. The fact that all of the respondents share the experience of living in Shanghai limits the generability of the research result to some extent. Shanghai is the richest city in the country and it is characterized by a historical and present influence from western countries. This suggests that students who live in Shanghai are more likely to be influenced by western culture. On the other hand, Shanghai is also a city that gathers students from all over China. Therefore, it is an optimal location for someone (like me) who wishes to get in contact with people with different backgrounds. In order to limit the negative effects of the choice of Shanghai as a city, I was careful to assure that the respondents came from different regions.

All of the interviews were conducted in English with English-speaking students. The choice of speaking only to English-speaking students was not considered to be optimal since I estimated that there was a potential risk that the communication between me and the respondents might get limited. Another aspect is that this strategy might limit the generability of the results since it suggests that the perspectives of students who don't speak English (and thereby, students who probably had little influence from English-speaking societies) were not considered as potential interviewees. My reason for choosing to speak to English-speaking students was that I estimated that it was preferable to conduct the interviews without an external interpreter, due to the sensitive character of the questions asked.²⁵ The presence of an unknown interpreter could have affected the respondents' will to express themselves freely and independently.²⁶

²⁵ The fact that I succeeded in interviewing two respondents who had never spoken to a foreigner before should defend the selection to some extent.

²⁶ That the questions were sensitive can be exemplified with the reaction of one of the interviewees. The respondent seemed to be relaxed during the interview but changed character after the interview was finished when she suddenly remembered that her opinions had been registered on tape. The respondent then suddenly seemed worried and declared that she was

3.4 The interview guide

In order to be able to determine the relevance of the theoretic perspectives, the interview guide builds on the three clashes that were elaborated in chapter 2. When constructing the interview guide, some of the clashes were operationalized into questions that concern human rights. Thanks to the focus group meeting, I knew that the censorship on Internet was a hot topic among university students. I therefore chose to ask the respondents about their thought on this issue. This was thought of as a way to bring a rather abstract clash down-to earth. The censorship is an issue that has become *talk of the town* among students and it was therefore a question that the respondents could relate to easily.

To ensure a high validity of the interview guide and at the same time ask comprehensive questions turned out to be a complicated task. In some cases I had the impression that theoretically valid questions almost automatically resulted in difficulties for the respondents to answer them. If I on the other hand chose to simplify the questions, the validity diminished and did not provide me with enough information. This might be a common problem among scientists but the level of abstraction of the phenomena in question surely increased the challenge.

The model on next page illustrates the way in which the interview questions were elaborated. In the left column each ideal type is presented. In the column in the middle I have listed theoretic questions that I considered were necessary to answer in order to be able to categorize the material. In the right column, questions appear as in the actual interview situation.

not sure that what she had said during the interview actually corresponded to her own opinions. She talked about the importance of presenting her country in a good way and required me to let her check any quotation before publishing them in the thesis.

Figure 2: Construction of questions for the interviews

THEME 1: CONCEPTION OF THE PERSON

| Ideal types | Theoretic questions | Dynamic questions |
|--|---|---|
| The Communitarian: Based on culture | How does the IP understand the value of reflective choice? | - In your opinion, what is a good life? |
| The Liberal: Based on rationality | How does the IP understand the origin of values? | - What kinds of choices do you want to make in life? |
| | How does the IP understand the importance of community when deciding which values to promote in a specific society? | - How important is it for you are the person who makes these choices? |
| | | - Can you think of any choice that you believe that everybody should to do on his or her own? |
| | | - Why do you think we have values? |

THEME 2: DEGREE OF UNIVERSALISM

| Ideal types | Theoretic questions | Dynamic questions |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| The Communitarian: Particularism | How does the IP understand the universality of values? | - What do you think about the idea to have the same human rights everywhere on earth? |
| The Liberal: Universalism | How does the IP understand the need and desirability of a universal chart of rights? | - Is it possible? |
| | What does the IP think of cross-cultural claims? | - Is it a good thing? |
| | | - The Chinese government's actions in the human rights field are sometimes criticized. What are your reactions to this? |

THEME 3: LIBERAL ATOMISM

| Ideal types | Theoretic questions | Dynamic questions |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| The Communitarian: Collectivism | How does the IP prioritize the value of the community comparing to the value of the individual? | - In China there is a discussion about whether there should be restrictions on Internet, like limitations on what opinions one should have the right to express. What do you think about this issue? |
| The Liberal: Individualism | How does the IP value the possibility to limit liberal (individual) rights in order to serve the need of the community? | - Some people say that there should be different limitations to freedom of expression in China, comparing to other countries. What do you think about this argument? |
| | | - Can you think of anything that the state should not have the right to do towards its citizens? |

3.5 Reflections about the interviews

The original interview guide ended up being modified several times due to problems of comprehension and the interviewees' demands for more specified questions. Given the celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)²⁷, I had planned to use it as a starting point for discussion. This proved to be complicated since the knowledge of the UDHR was poor.²⁸

To create questions that are easy to understand and stimulate an interviewee to refer to his or her own experience turned out to be complicated since my thesis regards normative and rather abstract ideas. At some occasions the respondents admitted that they had never reflected upon the questions that I asked. This may be perceived of as problematic since one could plausibly ask: what is the point of asking questions that people cannot answer? Yet, I believe that it would be wrong-headed to reject the approach with this argument. After all, the lack of an answer in an interview is also an answer.

At some occasions the respondents has a hard time to express personal opinions. Maybe this is due to a lack of habit to express personal opinions on political issues. It could also be a result of me as an interviewer. Given my young age and the fact that I openly presented myself as a first-time visitor might have inspired the interviewees to try to *explain* China to me. At certain occasions I ended up in a situation where the interviewees would explain the official position as if they were representatives of the Communist Party or the Chinese nation and not there to represent themselves. I guess this problem is connected to the fact that some of my questions regarded human rights. There is a

²⁷ Information about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be found at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

²⁸ None of the respondents were familiar with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When being asked to define what human rights are, the respondents referred to the following declarations: Human Rights of Fudan University, the Chinese Constitution, the American Declaration of Independence and the declaration that was signed during the French Revolution.

widespread notion in China that the international community misjudges China.²⁹ Fortunately, I discovered that I would get more personal and detailed answers if allowed the interview to take the character of a friendly conversation and asked the questions in a less direct way. Only then the respondents would start speaking in terms of “I think...” or “I feel...” which was necessary in order to grasp *their* opinions.

Inspired by the idea of theoretical saturation,³⁰ the exact number of interviews was not established before the interviews took place. Instead, I took the habit of making a quick summary of each interview (as soon as it finished) and writing down the *kind of view* that each respondent expressed. After having conducted 10 interviews I estimated that I had succeeded in covering the different ways of thinking within the population since no new kinds of views came up. I then decided that I had enough material to begin with the analysis.

3.6 Method of analysis

All of the interviews except for one were recorded on tape and transcribed word by word.³¹ One primary step of analysis was to summarize each interview. I also made a preliminary highlighting of quotations that related to the ideal types. A second step was to group different statements that referred to the same kind of view. As a final step I created a map that shows a categorization of arguments that correspond with the liberal and communitarian ideal types (see next page). The analysis was considered to be finished when I reached a level where I felt that I had succeeded in exploring all liberal and communitarian views in the recorded material.

As the ideal types are not very detailed, the importance of *interpretation* in the

²⁹ See the article “Chinese public go online to criticize Western media”, published on the 28th of March 2008 www.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-0328/content_7877535.htm

³⁰ Esaissason et al. p.294

³¹ The first interview was not recorded due to technical problems. Given the lack of access to correct citations, respondent 1 has not been quoted in the thesis.

analysis has been crucial. One could criticize this approach and argue that at loose analytical tool probably leads to loose (and vague) interpretations. I have considered this argument but still believe that the elasticity of the analytic tool in this case is a strength, since I am entering a new area of study. As compensation for the elasticity of the ideal types (and thereby also, the risk of vague interpretations), I have been careful to explain what it was in every quote that I perceived of as liberal or communitarian. In accordance with the questions for research, I present not only arguments that fit the ideal types but also arguments that are considered to *not* correspond to either liberalism or communitarianism. This strategy hopefully ameliorates the transparency and increases the inter-subjectivity of the analysis to some extent.

4. Empirical findings and analysis

4.1 Empirical findings

A map that shows the categorization of the argument is presented on the following page. When creating the map I have chosen to only use views that were expressed on a manifest level (explicitly). Another possibility would have been to pay less attention to what the respondents actually *say* and instead focus on what I interpret that they *mean*. That approach was considered as less preferable since it would not allow me to complement the analysis with quotes.³²

³² Compare with Esaïasson et al. p. 306

Figure 3: Perceptions of the relation between individual and community

| PERCEPTIONS OF THE RELATION BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|--|---|
| Conception of the person | | Degree of universalism | | Liberal atomism | |
| Communitarian | Liberal | Communitarian | Liberal | Communitarian | Liberal |
| All values are taught | If your life is controlled by others it is meaningless | Different people will always focus on different things | All people want to vote | China's big population justifies non-implementation of certain human rights | The right to life cannot be compromised |
| Willing to accept the life that society offers | You have to choose your own way of life | What human rights are was decided in the west and therefore they are not valid in China | The government does not have the right to oppress and control the people | The government has its reasons for limiting human rights | |
| Tradition determines how people choose to live | Even poor and uneducated people need freedom of speech | Human rights is a mutual relationship. You should deserve to be protected | The right to freedom is universal | The need to control the population is more important than each person's right to decide how many kids you want | |
| Some people are happy without making choices | | Others countries should not decide human rights for China Ideology determines what human rights are | People have rights | Internet should be free as long as it does not harm people | |
| | | | | The Chinese political system is fit for the country's situation now | |
| | | | | The whole country will benefit if we keep controlling the territory | |
| | | | | One-child policy as a benefit for the whole world | |

4.2 Analysis

a) Conception of the person

Concerning the conception of the person, I was able to recognize both liberal and a communitarian ways of thinking. As already explained, the communitarian perspective is the one that reflective choice does not necessarily constitute a part of human nature. This view can be exemplified with an interviewee who, when asked about her opinion on this issue answered that not everybody needed to make choices in order to live a good life:

“I have a friend. She doesn’t like making choices. 90% of her life was determined by her parents. They wanted her to study mathematics. Almost everything was designed by her parents (...)”³³
she seems to live a happy life, happier than we. I don’t know why. When I have to make choices, I have to think it over, really, really hard. But she is happy every day.”³⁴

The liberal perspective defines reflective choice and the possibility to choose your own way of life is fundamental for every human being. This way of thinking can be exemplified with an interviewee who declared that without freedom of choice was simply necessary:

“...because if you are a human, if you are controlled by others, your life is meaningless. You are not living your own life, so... and I think the person should be independent. At least in mind, we can... just be what we want to be. I really think this to be important.”³⁵

b) Degree of universalism

Concerning the degree of universalism, some views were difficult to categorize. One example of this is the idea that all societies develop in an evolutionistic way and that modernization of a society will lead to the appreciation of certain values. The idea here is that certain values, such as freedom, human rights and

³³ All quotations are marked with quotation marks. In cases where I have shortened a quote, this is marked with the following symbol: (...)

³⁴ R 3

³⁵ R 10

democracy will evolve naturally as a result of economical and social development:

“When I think about human rights, the basic level is the right is to survive. If we look at Africa, right now people don’t have the human right to survive. Their life is at a threatened level. So, those people, their consideration of human rights is actually to survive, not freedom or something like that. But considering China right now, the majority of the people (...) they can depend on themselves, they can have food to eat and right now we are concerning more about... it is not about “can we live?” but it is about “how do we live?” ³⁶

I had some trouble in deciding whether to categorize this view as liberal or not. On one hand it can be seen as liberal since it suggests that some values have the capacity of applying to all people. On the other hand one could also think of this as a non-liberal argument, since it suggests that certain conditions (level of development etc.) are necessary in order to appreciate those values. A communitarian scholar might even take this as a proof of communitarianism; if people in a society endorse liberal values it means that that the society has become a part of a liberal community! Given the dual possibilities of interpreting this argument, I have chosen not to categorize it as either liberal or communitarian.

As a contrast to that view some respondents expressed a much less evolutionistic future. One respondent declared that there was no use in defining common goals for the international community with the following words:

“We will not have only one song in the world. We have a lot of voices and every country has its own standard.” ³⁷

This view was categorized as communitarian, since it suggests that particularism is the only way forward. Another view that was not categorized as either liberal

³⁶ R 4

³⁷ R 5

or communitarian argumentation is the one of national sovereignty as prior to human rights. This is a view that other scholars have found out to be common in China.³⁸ The following comment made by an interviewee highlights this view:

Me: ...what do you think about the fact that other countries criticize the Chinese government's actions in the human rights field?

R: "Sometimes I just say that is it a Chinese affair, so you don't need to intervene in Chinese policy. I think that we can manage it well. You don't have to criticize that. When the French prime minister talked to the Chinese prime minister he said that Tibet is the main problem of the relations between China and France. I think that is quite ridiculous because Tibet is in China... not in France." ³⁹

c) Liberal atomism

Concerning liberal atomism I was confronted with respondents' will to sacrifice some rights in order to deal with unfortunate set of social and economical circumstances. According to Bell, this is a common view in China.⁴⁰ I chose to classify this as a communitarian argument since it suggests that each society has the moral right to decide what rights to sacrifice. This idea can be exemplified with one respondent who expressed that it would be harmful to introduce human rights as long as China remained underdeveloped:

"The human rights is good, but we have to face the reality of China. (...) Peasants are rude people... they fight with knives. Intellectuals to talk with them will be hard. The best thing is to maintain the stability. Try to boost the economy. And then, educate them in a good way, not in a controlled way. So that people can gradually be more open." ⁴¹

Another view is the one that the implementation of certain human rights is seen as a threat to development. This is an argument that falls outside liberal and communitarian argumentation and is one that previous research has chosen to

³⁸ Svensson

³⁹ R 2

⁴⁰ Bell 2006 p.54

⁴¹ R 4

call the *development first* argument.⁴² This idea can be exemplified with the following quotation:

“Developing countries should have more limits to freedom, total freedom can do harm to development.”⁴³

The respondents also expressed views that go along with communitarian thinking. The idea here is that the need of the society is seen as more important than the need of the individual. This clash was operationalized into a question about the censorship on Internet. The criteria for classifying an argument as communitarian was the respondent would express a need to give priority to the community instead of prioritizing the individual. One of the respondents justified censorship with the following argument:

Me: What do you think about the censorship on Internet?

IP: “Actually, I have heard about that, but not that serious. We can talk about everything on the Internet, I think so... I really do. I think that every government will put some limitations and limits. You don’t expect the government to let people say propaganda against the government.”⁴⁴

Another example of how a respondent refers to the common good of the society can be illustrated with the words of respondent nr. 5:

“Actually, as a matter of fact, every country has their own narrow, they will limit the opinions according to their own country. And I think that is necessary. If they take these narrows, it proves that they need these narrows.”⁴⁵

⁴² Bell 2006

⁴³ R 6

⁴⁴ R 3

⁴⁵ R 5

Another example of this is the view that the need to control the population can justify limits to the individual:

“... in China, the family-planning policy is a kind of violation of human rights. But it is necessary. We need to control the population.”⁴⁶

A similar but yet slightly different view is the one that socio-economical rights should be prioritized over civil and political rights. This is an argument that previous research has described as common⁴⁷ and one that came up during the interviews:

“...I mean, considering the biggest population around the world. Sometimes, first of all, you have to feed people, you have to make them survive, and then you can think of higher level of democracy, thinking about love, freedom, whatever the thing is...”⁴⁸

I also discovered ways of thinking that reminded of communitarianism. One respondent motivated the one-child policy with the argument that restrictions to some people’s freedoms were necessary in order to preserve the common good of the world:

“When I was in the Western society, I understood that you criticize China. Then I say; if we have too many population, then we will pollute the environment, then what will you say? ...when we pollute the environment it is a problem for everybody. When we control the population, maybe it is a benefit for the whole world. Not only for China.”⁴⁹

Although the respondent did not refer to a community but reasoned in rather cosmopolite terms I still chose to categorize this view as communitarian. After all, the respondent emphasized the need to limit the need of an individual in order to serve the common good of a bigger population, in this case: the entire earth.

⁴⁶ R 2

⁴⁷ Wang p.753

⁴⁸ R 4

⁴⁹ R 2

None of the respondents mentioned the word community. This is not a problem since community is nothing more than the theorists' way of labelling a concept. What is more troubling is that the respondents only referred to that concept to a certain extent. They would, without exception, emphasize the importance of the *nation* and *the Chinese people*. Groups that exist within the nation, like Tibetans or Taiwanese, were not considered to be potential communities. Even if the views being expressed remind of communitarianism, one must remember that they all refer to one specific community; China.

5. Conclusion

5.1 The relevance of liberalism and communitarianism

The aim of this study is to determine the relevance of liberal and communitarian ideas among Chinese students. The use of an analytic tool based on the academic debate between liberals and communitarians has allowed me to do so. As the analysis shows, the respondents express ideas that correspond to both the communitarian and liberal perspective. However, when discussing the relation between individual and society, the respondents also express ideas that do not correspond to liberalism and communitarianism. As previous research has tended to illustrate China as one people (with one culture and one view), this thesis challenges such generalizing and suggests a more diversified picture.

The selection of respondents in this thesis has been limited to students who live in Shanghai. Therefore I cannot guarantee that all relevant perspectives within the population *students* have been covered. However, I can guarantee that I have covered perspectives that *actually exist* among Chinese students.

Although many arguments remind of communitarianism, it is interesting to notice that the respondents, without exception, all refer to the Chinese nation. The idea that there might be other communities within a nation that claim the right to choose their own principles and priorities, finds no consent among the

respondents. Therefore, the ideas do not correspond perfectly to communitarianism. In order to qualify as a communitarian, it is not enough to question liberal values and speak favourably about moral pluralism. As a communitarian, one should also have the intellectual capacity to, at least in theory, consent different communities the possibility to choose their own way of organizing the society. Any notion of China as communitarian is therefore too simplified.

As mentioned in the introduction, scholars continue to discuss whether the arguments in the Chinese debate are unique or if the debate is universal. This study has contributed to that debate, showing that among the future elite of China views can be found that go along with both liberal and communitarian thinking. At a time when China continues to boost its confidence in international affairs and the influence of Chinese views is likely to increase, the label of communitarianism as *western* might be of limited relevance.

5.2 Further research

This thesis has answered the question of which liberal and communitarian views that can be found among the future elite of China. This knowledge is in line with the aim of the study; to determine the relevance of liberalism and communitarianism in the Chinese context. Due to the qualitative method being used it has not been possible to find out how common the views are. A quantitative analysis could bring some light on that issue. In order to further position the future elite against the elite of today, one could compare the results from this study with analyses of the current political leadership in China. That approach would contribute in helping us understand what everyone seems to be asking; what future holds for China.

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Electronic resources

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
www.undp.org

UNDP Gender-related Index 2007/2008
<http://hdrstats.undp.org/indicators/269.html>

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

The article “Chinese public go online to criticize Western media” was published on the 28th of March 2008.
http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2008-03/28/content_7877535.htm

All websites were accessible on the 25th of May 2009.

7. Appendix

Appendix 1: Selection of respondents

| | Sex | Origin | Interest in politics | Membership of the Communist Party | Area of study |
|-------|-------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| IP 1 | Woman | Hubei (East) | Low | No | Educational science |
| IP 2 | Man | Hubei (East) | High | Yes | Social science |
| IP 3 | Woman | Hunan (East) | High | Yes | Social science |
| IP 4 | Woman | Jiangshi (East) | High | No | Medicine |
| IP 5 | Woman | Guangdong (South) | High | Yes | Social science |
| IP 6 | Man | Guangdong (South) | Low | Yes | Physical science |
| IP 7 | Man | Hunan (East) | Low | No | Mathematics |
| IP 8 | Man | Macau (SAR) | Low | No | Economy |
| IP 9 | Man | Hubei (East) | High | Yes | Engineering |
| IP 10 | Man | Xinjiang (West) | High | No | Economy |

Explanation of criteria for selection of respondents:

Sex: Men and women's different living conditions might result in different views.⁵⁰

Origin: Western China is more rural, poorer and less developed than the eastern part of the country. The three SAR regions⁵¹ Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau have special political systems, which might affect the opinions.

Interest in politics: Interest in politics might determine the respondent's ability to choose side when being confronted with questions about human rights.

Membership of the Party: Membership of the party might determine how the respondent thinks of the Party's opinion about the issues.

Area of study: Area of study might affect the opinions since some subjects offer more political analyses than others.

⁵⁰ The United Nations Development Programme's Gender-related Development Index 2007/2008 ranks China as nr. 81 out of 177 countries.

⁵¹ Special Administrative Regions

Appendix 2: Interview guide

OK to use tape recorder?

The information from this interview will be used to...

Your participation is anonymous...

No answers are right or wrong. You can say anything you want...

Introductory questions

What do you study?

Where in China do you come from? When did you move to Shanghai?

Are you interested in politics? In engaging actively in politics?

Have you been thinking about joining the Party? Why/why not?

Theme 1: Conception of the person

- According to you, what is a good life?
- Think about your life today. What kinds of choices do you want to make in life?
- Are there any choices that you really feel that no one else can do for you?
- How important is it for you are the one who makes these choices?
- What if somebody else would make those choices for you?
- Can you think of any choice that you believe that everybody should to do on his or her own?

Now I would like to ask you a question about values. How would you explain what values are?

- Why do you think we have values?
- Can you think of any value that can be found among all people in all times?
(If so, can you give an example of such values?)

I will now ask you some questions that are related to human rights. What do you think of when I say human rights?

Theme 2: Degree of universalism

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is supposed to be a list of rights that are applicable for all people on earth. What do you think about the ambition to create a list of universal rights?

- Is it possible?/ Can everybody agree?
- Is it desirable?/ Should everybody agree?

The Chinese government's actions in the human rights field are sometimes criticized, both outside and inside China.

- What are your reactions to this?
- Can such criticism be justified? (Why/ why not?)
- Some say that all people on earth have the same rights. What do you think?

Theme 3: Liberal atomism

In China there is a discussion about whether there should be restrictions on Internet, like limitations on what opinions one should have the right to express.

- What do you think about this issue?

Some people say that there must be different limitations to freedom of expression in China comparing to other countries.

- What do you think about this argument?

Some people say that there are some things that a state never can do to its citizens. What do you think?

- Can you think of anything that the state should not have the right to do towards its citizens?

Concluding remarks

- Is there anything else you would like to say that we have not already talked about?
- What do you think about the questions I asked you?